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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BISHKEK 001100

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SUBJECT: SECURING KYRGYZ SUPPORT FOR MANAS AIRBASE

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Classified By: Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Thanks in large part to the Secretary's and Assistant Secretary Boucher's direct outreach to Kyrgyz President Bakiyev before and after the October 9 CIS summit, Manas Air Base appears safe for now. We have apparently dodged a bullet this time, with the Kyrgyz successfully resisting pressure from Moscow to close down the Base. Despite this diplomatic success, the Base continues to remain vulnerable, both to outside pressure and domestic opposition. Manas plays a crucial role in our operations in Afghanistan and will be vitally important for any future effort to increase US forces there. It currently provides 85 percent of in-air refueling over Afghanistan and serves as the main point of entry and exit for nearly all US forces in the Afghan theater. Manas also has substantial spare cargo-handling capacity that could allow it to play a much larger role in increasing logistical support to US forces in the Afghan theater. Conversely, its loss would hurt our strategic position significantly. We need to build on our recent success in fending off the threat to the Base, increase our chances of holding on to this key facility in the long term without disruptive roller-coaster-like "ups and downs," and begin to build an enhanced security and political partnership with the Kyrgyz government. This message proposes that we do so by considering several relatively modest Kyrgyz requests for assistance related to the Base. Making such tactical expenditures now could yield both a better relationship with a key regional partner and strategic benefits for our efforts to defeat extremism and terrorism in the broader region. END SUMMARY.

Withstanding Russian Pressure

12. (C) Thanks in large part to the Secretary's and Assistant Secretary Boucher's direct outreach to Kyrgyz President Bakiyev before and after the October 9 CIS summit, Manas Air Base appears safe -- for now. The Kyrgyz were able to withstand Russian pressure by offering commercial carrots to Moscow, including a 75% Gasprom stake in Kyrgyzgas and a majority stake in the defense firm Dastan. President Bakiyev

is also motivated by the significant revenues the base generates -- tens of millions of dollars in direct payments, contracts and airport fees.

13. (C) We dodged a bullet this time, but this does not mean the Kyrgyz commitment to Manas Air Base is firm, and the Base remains vulnerable both to internal and external pressures. Manas can either continue to be threatened with closure, on a sort of "roller-coaster," with us having to periodically call in the Cavalry (Washington, the Secretary, etc.) every time the pressure on the Kyrgyz from Russia gets out of hand. Or, if we make modest increases in compensation, we can get in return an expanded role for the Base in the war on terrorism.

Pressure from within, too

14. (C) In addition to pressure from Russia, strong domestic opposition to the Base also exists. Kyrgyz air traffic controllers have again threatened to strike against coalition aircraft, for the third time in the past two years. At issue is the U.S. practice not to pay navigation fees for military aircraft, coupled with Kyrgyz refusal to steer any Base revenues to compensate air traffic controllers. Other grievances over the Base include Kyrgyz incomprehension at U.S. refusal to pay compensation for a 1999 traffic accident involving an Embassy officer, Kyrgyz conviction that fuel dumping by U.S. military aircraft damages the environment, lack of clarity over the legal status of civilian contractors at the base who live in downtown Bishkek, and perceived lack of U.S. responsiveness to requests for a new radar for Manas airport and a new control tower. A relatively modest increase in compensation could, in our view, remove many of

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these irritants and shore up support for the Base.

2006 Shooting Incident is Issue #1

15. (C) In addition to the issues mentioned above, the U.S. is poised to take a step that will unavoidably ignite public passions against the Base. Following a nearly two-year investigation into the December, 2006 shooting incident in which a U.S. airman, claiming self-defense, shot and killed a Kyrgyz truck driver, the U.S. is finalizing its report. The U.S. committed to providing to the Kyrgyz the results of its investigation following government and public outcry after the Kyrgyz found the airman guilty of first degree murder and learned that he was subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and not Kyrgyz law.

16. (C) With Kyrgyz public opinion convinced of the airman's guilt, our report will ignite a new wave of media criticism of the Base. The issue is still fresh in the public's mind, and the nearly two-year delay in concluding the U.S. investigation has fueled Kyrgyz suspicions that our inquiry is a whitewash. The widow of the truck driver recently filed a case in the Supreme Court to declare null and void the parliament's ratification of the 2001 base agreement.

17. (C) The depth and extent of the criticism that our investigation report generates will in large part depend on how well we can make the point -- both in private and publicly -- that justice has been served. Unfortunately, the draft investigation report the Embassy has seen does not make a strong case that the command action taken was commensurate with the findings in the case. We do not question the command action, but the report must better articulate how the determination leading to the action was made. Should we be unable to demonstrate a credible legal process, we can expect that the Kyrgyz people, from President Bakiyev on down, will react with emotion and could take steps to close down the Base.

And Russia is just reloading(

18. (C) Russia may be ambivalent about Operation Enduring Freedom -- relieved that U.S., not Russian, troops are fighting terrorism and Islamic extremism, but pleased that victory is not coming quickly for the U.S. All things being equal, the Russians would prefer if we could conduct operations in Afghanistan without having to station troops in its backyard. Russia reiterates its unease over the Base to President Bakiyev and the Kyrgyz at a frequency and level the U.S. cannot match. Bakiyev speaks or meets with his Russian counterpart almost monthly; ministerial exchanges occur weekly, and the Russian Ambassador enjoys unfettered access to Bakiyev and his inner circle.

Manas: More Important than Ever

19. (C) The status quo, in which we compensate the Kyrgyz for hosting the Base, but remain largely silent on the unresolved Base issues, has been enough to maintain access to the Base. But it has left the Base vulnerable to periodic challenge. It is now clear that the next U.S. administration will focus more resources and troops in Afghanistan than is currently the case. And that means increasing the volume of troops and material transiting Manas. At present, 97% of all U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan transit Manas on their way in and out of the theater, and the base provides 85% of all aerial refueling over Afghanistan. Loss of Manas would be a body blow to Operation Enduring Freedom that we can ill afford. Manas is perhaps not irreplaceable, but the cost in dollars, resources, time and effort to piece together alternative routes and bases would consume a huge part of CENTCOM's focus that could otherwise be devoted to prosecuting the war. More to the point, a relatively modest increase in compensation and engagement could lead to a

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stable and even expanded role for Manas Air Base in the war on terrorism.

What is to be done? Step Up Political Engagement

110. (C) The first step to take is to ramp up our political engagement. As the Secretary's phone call to Bakiyev illustrates, direct, high-level engagement with Bakiyev is the surest prophylactic against Russian pressures. Sustained engagement would not just help secure the Base, it could also expand the political and security relationship overall, advancing broader U.S. goals in the region. At a minimum, this requires cabinet-level contact a few times a year. Given the critical role that Manas Air Base is likely to play over the next year, we believe the best way to preserve access would be to arrange a meeting between Presidents Bush and Bakiyev before the end of the year. Not only would such a meeting balance the frequent summit level meetings with Russian President Medvedev, it would help the Kyrgyz to accept more readily the results of the U.S. investigation into the 2006 shooting incident.

Review the Shooting Investigation Report

111. (C) Regarding the investigation, the command action taken on the case must be seen by the Kyrgyz leadership and public as appropriate to the results of the investigation. If the current version of the report were released, we judge there would be a very high risk of a unilateral Kyrgyz decision to close down the Base, if not immediately, then perhaps an announced closure for 2010 when the current agreement expires. U.S. credibility in support of democratic reform, rule of law, and judicial reform would also be undermined. If we are unable to present a report that the Kyrgyz are likely to believe shows that the command action taken was consistent with the evidence, then we should be prepared to offer a significant gratis payment to Ivanov's widow in the amount of \$2 million dollars, which was her original claim.

Address Kyrgyz Concerns

¶12. (C) It is also time to take steps to address the hardy perennial issues of concern to the Kyrgyz that have been festering for years. Resolving these issues will cost money, and some risk setting unwelcome precedents. We see little alternative to increasing compensation, but there may be ways to address the precedent issues.

Fuel Dumping: The only way to remove this issue from the table is to provide compensation for the damage the Kyrgyz perceive this does to the environment. The Kyrgyz have proposed a fee based on the amount of fuel dumped. As an alternative, we could propose to increase compensation to address the environmental impact of the Base -- including fuel dumping. A payment on the order of \$1 million per year could, in our judgment, be sufficient to remove this issue from the bilateral agenda.

Contractor Status: The current bilateral agreement is vague regarding the status of civilian contractors, and can be interpreted to extend to them the equivalent status of U.S. Embassy technical and administrative staff, essentially protecting them from local prosecution. The Kyrgyz argue that this applies only to military personnel and Department of Defense direct hire civilians, and insist that civilian contractor personnel should be subject to Kyrgyz law. The U.S. could offer written clarification in a diplomatic note that it concurs with the Kyrgyz interpretation of the agreement.

Air Traffic Control Fees: To avoid setting a precedent for other U.S. bases abroad, we propose offering to the Kyrgyz to increase by approximately \$1 million per year the current air

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navigation fees that we currently pay for the civilian charter aircraft that transport U.S. troops to and from the U.S. and Manas. We could even approach the Kyrgyz and suggest that they raise their rates for these civilian charters, so we could be seen responding to their action. This would provide additional direct funding to air traffic controllers, removing the issue behind the periodic threat of strikes against coalition aircraft.

Damages for Traffic Accidents: The flagship issue is the Yasynov case, which involved U.S. Embassy personnel, not Base personnel. Nevertheless, in Kyrgyz minds it is linked to the perception that U.S. personnel can act with impunity. The only way to remove this issue from the agenda is to provide a gratis payment to the Yasynov family. \$50,000, which is what we provided to Ivanov's widow, would be an upper limit cost for this solution.

Fund Kyrgyz requests for Infrastructure

¶13. (C) Finally, we should accelerate the process currently underway to fund an airspace control system for Kyrgyzstan. This is a project the Kyrgyz have asked for, and responding positively would demonstrate that we have listened to what is important to the Kyrgyz. The original concept was to fund a radar for approximately \$30 million, but the Kyrgyz are now interested in a less costly GPS-based system. The money saved could be used to construct a new tower at Manas airport -- another project the Kyrgyz have asked for that we have declined to support.

Conclusion

¶14. (C) The combined cost of the solutions proposed above would be approximately \$15-20 million in one-time capital cost (for the air navigation control system and, possibly a new airport tower), a \$50,000 gratis payment to the Yasynov family, and approximately \$2 million per year in additional compensation to the Kyrgyz for continued access to Manas Air Base. Some of these measures would involve tough decisions; but making the effort and finding resources to address at

least some of the unresolved Base issues would, in our judgment, be more than justified, given the critical importance of the Base to the success of our operations in Afghanistan, and the opportunity it would provide for an expanded role for the Base and an enhanced security and political relationship with Kyrgyzstan.

GFOELLER